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ABSTRACT

Consultants experience difficulty in being effective in a foreign country, particularly in developing countries. Difficulties include definite cross-cultural differences that consultants lack the skills to overcome or adjust to, language and communication differences, consultants' inability to adjust to a new situation quickly, and inability of consultants to be accepted by and develop credibility with the host country. Three approaches to effective consulting are the directive style (the consultant in a dominant role), collaborative style (consultant's expertise in combination with client's local knowledge), and facilitative approach (the client as expert and the consultant as catalyst). The consultant must learn to use the different styles at the appropriate time. Overseas consulting requires these skills that apply to all three consulting styles: assessing how much the client can absorb, developing cross-cultural skills, dealing with a multiplicity of clients, dealing with gender barriers, establishing ownership and commitment, learning to be oneself in a different cultural context, and sizing up a situation quickly. Strategies for breaking into the international field include taking jobs with voluntary or religious organizations to get experience, being available on short notice, expanding network of contacts by attending meetings of international groups, and identifying organizations with potential overseas consulting opportunities. (YLB)

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CONSULTING OVERSEAS

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Being an effective consultant in one's own country is a difficult task, but it is even more difficult in a foreign country. Many consultants assume that, because they have the necessary knowledge and skills, they can work effectively overseas. Experience shows, however, that most consultants are not nearly as effective as they think they are overseas, particularly in developing countries. With the increasing number of training professionals who would like to break into the international field, an understanding of what makes a foreign consultant effective in another country and culture becomes more and more important.

This paper will explain why it is difficult to be an effective consultant overseas, discuss some of the essential consulting skills, and suggest some strategies for breaking into the international field. For purposes of this paper a "consultant" is a person or organization that is helping or providing assistance or a service to another person or organization. In many consulting assignments, the intent is to improve the self-sufficiency of the client organization.

Difficulties of Consulting Overseas

In a recent consulting assignment in Ecuador, a consultant expressed frustration that the government agency that he had worked with had not acted on his recommendations. According to the consultant, he had discussed his findings with the government officials before departure and everyone seemed to be in agreement with the recommendations. However, six months later nothing had been done to follow through on the recommendations. This is an all-too-familiar situation. What are the reasons for this?

First, there are often definite cross-cultural differences that consultants do not have the skills to overcome or adjust to. This is not to say that consultants are not aware of the need to be sensitive to other cultures. They are. However, they often do not have the necessary cross-cultural skills to deal effectively with a new culture, and for that reason they often perform poorly. Cross-cultural misunderstandings have an impact on internal company costs as well as external costs that can be measured in dollars and cents.

Furthermore, these misunderstandings result in missed opportunities -- often so subtle that the consultant does not even realize that he has missed the opportunity, false efficiency (the consultant thinks he has succeeded when he has not), and mistakes or errors that may raise costs or reduce income. (McCaffery and Hafner, "The Effect of Cultural Differences in Doing Business Overseas." Submitted for publication to ASTD.)

Second, language and communication are often one of the root causes for the difficulties of overseas consulting. Incredibly, far too many consultants think they can work effectively overseas without a command of the local language. This view is not only naive but, in many cases, downright arrogant. There is substantial evidence that, even when people master a foreign language, they still have some difficulties communicating. A person may know the grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation of a language, but true communication involves an understanding of the culture so that the individual can interpret subtle non-verbal signals and unfamiliar behavior.

Third, many consultants are not able to adjust to a new situation quickly. When a consultant arrives in a country, he has to satisfy all his basic needs as quickly as possible. In addition to getting over jet lag and changing money, the consultant must settle into a hotel, find out where the restaurants are, get around town, and take care of personal matters. There is also a need to adjust to the working style of the country, i.e., the pace, the sense of time, etc. Many consultants, particularly those who are relatively inexperienced, have difficulty adjusting as quickly as they should to be effective.

The final point is that many consultants never are accepted by the people they are working with -- they develop no credibility with the host country. What they say or recommend is politely received but not really accepted. This lack of credibility is exacerbated when consultants are not able to involve host country individuals in the assignment. In those cases, the recommendations are the consultant's alone; the host country counterparts have had no part in formulating them and feel detached from them. "Working with" and not "working for" is a distinction that many overlook in their approach to consulting.

Approaches to Effective Consulting

One of the ways to approach consulting is to look at the consulting style, i.e., the way the assistance is provided to the persons or organization being helped. A consultant's style grows out of the beliefs and assumptions that he has about how the assistance should be provided. This consulting approach usually comes from deeply held beliefs and values and may be based on previous positive or negative experiences. Many consultants have never examined their consulting styles and do not consciously shift styles according to the situation. The ability to use various styles consciously greatly increases the ability of a consultant to deal with a number of different situations.

What are the various consulting styles? One training organization has identified three basic consulting styles: directive, collaborative, and facilitative. These styles are described below. (The Consulting Styles Inventory was developed by Training Resources Group, 1021 Prince Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314.)

The directive style is based on the assumption that the consultant is an expert on the subject and can best help by providing answers, doing much of the work required, and in general playing a dominant role. A further assumption is that the client has little or no expertise to solve the problem. This style works well when the situation is a one-time occurrence and isn't likely to occur again. It does not work when the client has to carry on the work after the consultant leaves.

A consultant using the collaborative style assumes that he can be most helpful when his expertise is combined with the local knowledge of the client to arrive at a solution. This style implies working with the client at all stages and relying on the consultant less than in the directive approach. The collaborative style works best when the client has the resources and time to devote and when it is important to transfer skills and knowledge to the client. It does not work when a problem needs immediate action.

In the facilitative approach, the client is considered the expert, and the consultant merely serves as a catalyst to help manage the stages of the

consultation process. The consultant listens, offers suggestions, raises questions, and provides feedback. This approach or style works when the client is innovative and somewhat self-sufficient; it has limitations when the internal capability is not available and when time and resources are short.

Consultants have to develop skills in order to master these three consulting styles. Most consultants tend to use the directive style, even when the situation may call for another style. Understanding the different styles is the first step in developing the skills to use them at the appropriate time. A facility with the various styles is particularly important overseas, where consultants do not have an implicit sense for the appropriate consulting style and need to be very versatile.

Overseas Consulting Skills

Overseas consulting requires some skills which are different from those that are necessary in the United States. They are also skills that apply to all three of the consulting styles described above.

- Assessing how much can be absorbed by the client. Many consultants recommend inappropriate solutions because they have not properly assessed the client's capability. In many cases a state-of-the-art approach may not always be helpful. The situation may call for incremental changes that can be absorbed over time.
- Developing cross-cultural skills. Cross-cultural skills go way beyond knowing about the customs and geography of a particular country. Cross-cultural training should focus on helping people develop the skills to learn about another culture rather than on learning about the specifics of a culture. These skills include transitions, information-gathering and filtering, managing value differences, transactions, dealing with ambiguity, and communication. (These skills were conceptualized and developed by Training Resources Group as part of a World Bank contract.)

- Dealing with a multiplicity of clients. In many consulting situations overseas, particularly in developing countries, a consultant must deal with several clients. In the case of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, often he has to work with local representatives as well as local government agency personnel and the firm which hired him. The various clients often have different standards of assessing the consultant's efforts, making it difficult for him to satisfy everyone.
- Dealing with gender barriers. In some countries, such as in the Arab World, gender barriers are significant obstacles. In a culture where it is very difficult for a local woman to rise to a position of importance, local men may find it difficult to accept a foreign woman.
- Establishing ownership and commitment. When the appropriate consulting style is facilitative or collaborative, it is very important that the consultant know how to make the client feel ownership in the project. Unless the client feels that the project belongs to him, it is unlikely that he will act on the consultant's recommendations. This is especially critical in the Third World where so-called foreign experts have been giving advice for several decades without involving their clients sufficiently to establish ownership and commitment.
- Learning to be oneself in a different cultural context. Being sensitive to a different culture does not mean that a person cannot be himself. Many inexperienced consultants try so hard to fit into the foreign culture that they end up almost trying to change their personalities. This is, of course, quite difficult to do, apparent to the hosts, and usually counterproductive.
- Sizing up a situation quickly. Short-term consultants are generally not given a great deal of time to assess a situation, to clarify the goals of the consultancy, and to develop a work plan to carry out the assignment. The ability to size up a situation quickly saves a

lot of time and helps greatly in establishing credibility.

Breaking into the International Field

As a first step in the job search, an individual who wants to break into the international field should be aware that there are several types of organizations with an international focus.

- Businesses, such as multinational corporations and other private sector companies that have overseas affiliates.
- International organizations, such as the U.N. organizations (World Health Organization, International Labor Organization, United Nations, World Bank, etc.)
- U.S. government agencies, including the Agency for International Development, Department of Education, Department of State, Department of Commerce, Peace Corps, etc.
- Voluntary organizations (CARE, Save the Children, Foster Parents Plan, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, etc.)

Figure 1 lists some key contacts to pursue opportunities in these organizations.

Any trainer who wants to break into the international field should develop a strategy to acquire the skills discussed in this paper and get the necessary experience. The following is a list of suggestions to help a person get started on an international career.

1. Take short-term assignments to establish and develop contacts.
2. Rewrite your resume to emphasize overseas living and work experience as well as multi-cultural experience in the United States.

3. Take jobs with voluntary or religious organizations that may pay a lower salary than you currently make in order to get experience.
4. Use your existing job as a basis for international work, especially if your organization has an international division or affiliate.
5. Be available on short notice to take advantages of opportunities that may arise.
6. Expand your network of contacts by attending meetings of international groups.
7. Systematically identify the organizations or companies that you want to pursue.

Effective overseas consulting requires more than skills and knowledge of a field. The trainer who thinks that because he is effective in the United States will automatically be effective overseas is mistaken. It is also true, however, that with the mastery of certain consulting skills and styles, a trainer can, with experience, be quite successful in overseas consulting.

Figure 1

Organizations or References for Comprehensive
Listings of Potential Overseas Consulting Opportunities

Business or Industry

Directory of American Firms Operating in
Foreign Countries, 1984, Universal Business
Publications, Inc., 50 E. 42nd St., New York,
NY 10017.

Center for International Private Enterprise
c/o U.S. Chamber of Commerce
1615 H St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20002
(202) 463-5552

Voluntary Organizations

Private Agencies Collaborating Together (PACT)
777 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

International Organizations

United Nations Information Center
1889 F Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006